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SERMON BY THE REV. THEODORE EDSON.

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ON THE RELIGIOUS CAPABILITIES OF CHILDREN:

A Sermon,

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Prov. viii. 17.—"*I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me.*"

WHETHER children, at a very early age, are indeed capable of becoming truly religious, is a question of great interest and importance. At first sight there might seem to be no room for difference of opinion on this subject. But upon examination it will be found, that in regard to this point there is a great difference between the Bible and the world; between the doctrine of CHRIST, and the prevalent impression on the public mind; between the authorized symbols of the Church, and the current practice of many Christians.

For what is the common impression in regard to the religious capabilities of children? Were the question to be put to any intelligent Christian, whether children, so soon as they are proper subjects of intellectual and moral discipline, are capable of becoming truly religious, I presume he would answer in the affirmative. And yet is this the conviction on which this same individual acts? Is this, in fact, the impression prevalent in the religious community on this subject? Do children actually receive the sentiment, that they at their tender age are quite as susceptible of religion as adults? Are the means of religion plied to them accordingly? Are they made to feel that religion is as much expected of *them* as of older

people? Let parents, even Christian parents, say whether they are not looking forward to a time when their children will be better qualified, on the score of age, to become religious than they now are? Do not your children perfectly well understand you rather to hope they will become religious when they are old enough, than expect they will be religious now? Do you not, for the present, put off urging them to an immediate acceptance of the Saviour, with the intention of doing so hereafter? Do you not decline pressing them to a decision now, thinking they will be better able to decide when older?

It is unnecessary, surely, to argue the *right* of the parent to use his utmost influence in forming the religious character of his child. This subject addresses not itself to those who maintain the idle theory, that the parent should not interfere with the child's religion; that the child must first grow up without a bias, and then, under the amazing advantage of ignorance, be free to choose for himself. Those only are now addressed, who know and feel that the iniquities of the fathers are visited upon the children; that the parent is as responsible for the religious character, as he is for the health or the manners of the child.

But you think it too early yet to apply your influence to this point. Notwithstanding the explicit language of the text and of other Scriptures to the contrary, is it not your own latent impression, that young children are not yet capable of being true Christians; or, at least, not susceptible of the complete development of religious character. It is believed that this opinion is very commonly received among Christians.

I propose to advocate the religious capabilities of children, and to refer to the Bible, to CHRIST, and to the Church, in their behalf.

When children are of an age to be susceptible of intellectual culture and moral discipline, they are then susceptible of Christian character, of gracious affections, and of religious duties. It is by no means pretended that they are *necessarily religious* at that age; but they are then susceptible of religion. So far

as regards the single circumstance of age, never more so than at that early period.

To simplify the investigation, let us consider a moment what is necessary to positive religious character. There must be *knowledge;* and there must be *divine influence.*

First, *knowledge* is necessary. And can children, at so early an age, have the requisite knowledge? Here we must distinguish between the amount of information or learning necessary to fill, with usefulness, stations of business and influence in the world, and the knowledge merely of those simple fundamental truths required by the Spirit of God as the instruments of renovation and edification of Christian character. What is the amount of knowledge necessary to the formation of religious character? Only that of a few, very plain, and very interesting facts of divine revelation.

The child must know that there is a God. And he can know this to all his purposes of practical religion, without any part of the argument by which your mind is satisfied of the truth. The child will more easily and more effectually receive this truth on the mere statement of the parent, than the veteran sinner upon the most lucid argument. And the child has far less difficulty in realizing the presence of an invisible Being than the adult, whose experience and associations incline him to recognise only a corporeal presence.

The child must know a distinction between good and bad. But that is a knowledge implied in the parent's first attempt to apply the discipline of correction. He must know that to be good is to be happy, and is the most desirable thing. He must know that God is good, and wishes *us* all to be so;—that he is our heavenly Father, and the giver of all our enjoyments;—that he is willing to hear our prayers, to forgive our sins, and help us to become virtuous and good; and, if we will be so, to make us happy with himself in heaven hereafter.

Such is the knowledge that is requisite. No mystical speculations. No abstruse metaphysics. But a few simple, affecting, and forcible truths adapted to the earliest exercise of the understanding, and suited to move the tender affections. It is

just the knowledge which the thirsting mind of very childhood grasps with wonderful avidity, and comprehends with remarkable facility and ease. As to the capacity of young children to acquire an amount of knowledge sufficient to induce the belief that they may become religious, let proper pains be taken, and there will be no difficulty but what may be soon surmounted.

Secondly; but knowledge will not make them religious without *divine influence*. The renewal of the heart, in childhood as well as in after life, must be the work of the HOLY SPIRIT. But is there any thing in the operations of that heavenly Agent of which childhood is any less susceptible than adult age? Will any Christian venture to say that the SPIRIT of GOD is unable to shed his precious influence on the minds of children; that he must have older hearts on which to produce his blessed results?

If it be said, that such an influence is inexplicable to the minds of children, it may be asked in reply, is it otherwise to the minds of adults? What account can the oldest and the maturest Christian give of the way and mode of this needful influence? With all the sagacity that human experience and years can give, who can tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth? Who can tell any thing more than the simple facts of the case; that it is a real, a necessary, attainable, blessed influence? Who can speak with certainty, but of its divine effects? Will any one dare to say that children are excluded from these effects? or, that years of irreligion can make them more susceptible subjects of this blessing? Are not children, then, susceptible both of the *divine influence* and of the *knowledge* necessary to the formation of decided religious character?

If we look at the nature of the religious principle, we may easily see that it is adapted to childhood. It is remarkable, on the one hand, that religious principle is chiefly a matter of the affections; and, on the other, that the affections constitute that part of the character which is the earliest developed. Who can tell how early the heart of a child is susceptible of love? And love is the great principle of our holy religion. "I love them," saith the text, "that love me." Here we have the

essential operation of the religious principle. The mutual exercise of divine love. And, in the text, this principle is laid down in connexion with the inculcation of early piety. "I love them that love me; *and* they that seek me *early shall* find me." The *early* seekers *especially* shall succeed, *because religion is a matter of love*, and therefore suited to the *earliest* operations of the mind. Will any one say, that the young may not love as strongly, decidedly, and effectually as those that are older? And may not a few plain considerations, enforced by the Holy Spirit's influence, lead the heart of the young to love God and to trust effectually in the Saviour?

The three great branches of Christian character, as laid down in the Scriptures, and as recognised in our baptismal obligations, in the exercise of which the Christian principle, in its origin, progress, and maturity, is developed, are *repentance*, *faith*, and *obedience*. These are component parts of the Christian character. Are children capable of these exercises?

For *repentance*, it is necessary that one be capable of perceiving the distinction between right and wrong; capable of feeling sorrow for the wrong, and a sense of the duty of doing right. Repentance is sorrow for sins past, and a settled purpose to do right. Such is repentance for the old or the young. Such are the natural faculties which it presupposes. Are children naturally competent, or incompetent, to such an exercise? Is it on the whole less adapted to childhood than to riper age?

Faith is another essential exercise of religion. And what is faith? Belief of God's word. A reliance upon the truth and certainty of what he teaches, commands, promises. A confiding in God and in the Saviour. A trusting in his offered mercy, favor, and friendship. Are children apt to believe or not? Are they capable of confiding, of trusting to credible assurances? Can they, or can they not, receive expressions of affection, of mercy, and of favor? Or are they distinguished from adults by any physical incapacity for such an exercise? Let those who are conversant with the powers of the human

mind, judge whether childhood be less compatible with belief than riper years.

Obedience is the other branch of Christian character. Obedience to God's authority; a submission of the mind to him. A reference in our conduct to his will, and an intention to obey him in whatsoever he requires of us. This submission to divine authority is necessary, at whatever age, to Christian character. The old must bring themselves to it as well as the young. Are the young incapacitated for obedience by the mere circumstance of youth? Does obedience necessarily involve natural faculties, which they do not yet possess? Rather, have adults any advantage over children in this respect? Is not the mind of a child far better suited to obedience, far more likely to feel the force of divine authority, than that of an irreligious man?

From this brief view of the elements of Christian character, may we not conclude that the essential exercises of religion are adapted to the earliest development of the mental powers? That the rudiments of religion are among the easiest intellectual acquirements of children? And that its operations are *far* simpler and plainer than many of the processes of mind, of which they give the amplest evidence in the earliest period of childhood? May we not believe that they are not incapacitated at all by want of years, but that, on the contrary, so far as respects the single circumstance of age, they are *more* susceptible of religious character than adults; and, other things equal, are more likely to become actual Christians?

And yet, before adopting a conclusion of such magnitude, contrary as it would seem to the current of public feeling, and to the impression and practice of parents, let us inquire whether it be supported by the Scriptures. What then do we gather from them as to the capacity of children for the exercise of genuine and effectual religious affections?

When Peter preached with such remarkable success on the day of Pentecost, the multitudes of them that were convinced, came to him and to the rest of the apostles, saying, "Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of JESUS CHRIST," for two purposes. Be baptized, for the remission of sins, and for the promise annexed to obedience. This promise is, "and ye shall receive the gift of the HOLY GHOST." To adults, and unbaptized as they must have been, to whom the apostles preached, the command is, "Be baptized for the remission of sins." And the promise, upon their obedience, is, "Ye shall receive the gift of the HOLY GHOST." Such is the promise in case of *adults*. And how is it in case of children, who are in the hands of their parents, and who, if baptized, must be brought by their parents, or by their consent and approbation? "The promise," saith Peter, and it is a part of the reply, "the promise," i. e. of the HOLY GHOST, of the special and effectual influences of the religion; "the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our GOD shall call."

The inference is unavoidable and directly to our point, that *children* are not only subjects of baptism, but also, at an early age, susceptible of the saving and effectual influences of the HOLY SPIRIT, of the true and genuine exercises of religion, and of sharing the hopes and promises of the Gospel.

What was the conduct of the Saviour, when he was upon earth, toward little children? Very few, comparatively, of his transactions are recorded. Just enough to furnish us with principles and examples. Yet, in the small portion of his life which the Gospel history embraces, place is found for instances of *special* notice, care, tenderness, and affection, toward *little children*. I can easily believe that these were not solitary transactions, performed for effect merely, but that they manifested his *habitual feeling* toward children; and that it was his practice, in his various journeyings and intercourse with society, to express his good-will toward them. And it is delightful to imagine the numbers, now where JESUS is, who, from his affectionate notice and blessing when they were children, received those impressions and influences which remained with them through all the trials and dangers of life, till they were brought safely home to his glory, and now behold *his* face

in heaven, in whose arms they were folded and caressed on earth.

Some facts are recorded, as I said, for illustration of the applicableness of his religion. In one of his discourses, when he was inculcating the important duty of Christian humility, it is said that he took up a little child, and thereby enforced his doctrine. The incident speaks volumes to our subject. Children were accustomed to approach him. They loved to be near him. They came around him, even on public occasions. His manner toward them gained at once their hearts and their confidence.

But still it may be asked, were they capable of becoming truly subjects of his religion? were they susceptible of genuine religious affections, and could they sustain the Christian character? Once little children were brought to him for the blessing of his religion. His disciples, acting on that false impression, so prevalent then, so prevalent to this day, that it is a religion for adults and not for children, rebuked those who brought them. He was not accustomed to be angry. It was not a light matter that could disturb the serenity of his feelings. "But JESUS," on this occasion, "was *much* displeased, and," with the emphasis of manifest displeasure, "said, *Suffer* the little children to come unto me, and *forbid* them not, for *of such* is the kingdom of heaven." We ask, May children become Christians? CHRIST answers, "Of *such* is the kingdom of GOD." Can children be really religious? "Of such," he repeats, "is the kingdom of heaven." And saith he, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of GOD as a little child, he shall in no case enter therein." So far from *children* being unable to receive my religion for want of years, the great obstacle to *your* receiving it arises from those very evil habits which additional years have fastened upon you. So far from possessing superior advantages over them, *you* must go back and reacquire some of the characteristics of childhood, before you can receive the kingdom of GOD. And again he saith, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Evidently implying

that their age is the *more favorable* to the reception of his religion, and that *they* are, on the whole, *more* likely to receive it than adults.

Agreeably to this doctrine, God saith in the text, "They that seek me *early* shall find me," i. e. with so much the greater facility. By as much earlier as they seek, by so much easier shall they find. The early years are decidedly *more*, instead of *less*, favorable to religious character.

While many other passages, more or less pertinently, sustain this doctrine, the whole tenor of Scripture will be found in agreement with it. Both the Old Testament ordinances and the New have a direct bearing on this point. How expressly were children embraced in the gracious provisions of the covenant, of which circumcision and sacrifice were the seals. Neither are they excluded from the Christian sacraments by any limitation of the Saviour. The entire absence of any restriction *as to age*, in case of either of the ordinances, evidently shows that the mere want of age was not intended to be a disqualification.

It is remarkable, that on this subject divine revelation has always been at issue with the opinions of the world. In time past, as well as present, the prevalent inclination of parents has ever been to underrate the religious capabilities of their children. It was so in the Saviour's time, if the Scripture is to be relied on. Jesus was himself fully aware of the fact; and in view of influence intrusted in the hands of parents, in view of the wonderful extent to which God hath put the character and the welfare of children in their power, and the momentous and solemn responsibility thereby resting upon them, he hath dropped frequent and fearful warning. "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones that believe in me." And sensible how very easily the parent might check a growing religious feeling in the mind of his children, and how very liable they would be to hinderances from this quarter, he saith, "Whosoever shall *offend*," i. e. *hinder*, *obstruct*, (for the word hath this meaning,) "whosoever shall *offend* one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him that a mill-

stone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." Again he saith, "Whosoever shall receive one such little one in my name, receiveth me." The same language precisely which he used in reference to his apostles themselves when he sent them forth.

Are little children, then, capable of becoming truly religious, and of sustaining the Christian character? Can any one doubt it?

And does our beloved Church, as also in other matters, so in this difficult and important case, adhere faithfully to the Scriptures? Does she, in conformity with popular impression, dare to *offend* one of these little ones, by putting any *obstacle* or *hinderance* in their way? Does she make the mere want of age an objection to their approaching her ordinances? There are denominations of Christians that require persons to have arrived at a certain age before they are allowed to partake of their communion. Does our Church, in any of her authorized formularies, put such a stumbling-block in the way of her children? Thank GOD—No. She only requires the guardians of her altar to look at the evidence of Christian character, not at the age of those who desire admission to full communion. Herein she has boldly taken up the example of her Lord and Master, in the very face of prevailing inclination and practice. She has entered solemn testimony to this point at the initiation of every infant member. So far from throwing obstacles in the way of children, she has inscribed a protest on her very *portal*, and gives it in solemn charge to sponsors at the font, "Ye are to take care that this child be brought to the bishop to be *confirmed* by him," i. e. publicly recognised and admitted to full communion. "Ye are to take care that this child be brought to the bishop to be *confirmed* by him."—At what age? Is age a consideration? *No;* it is designedly put out of consideration, and evidence of religious character alone is to be regarded, and that with all charity. An amount of *knowledge* is requisite, and, of course, the ordinary indications of a disposition to receive it, and of such qualifications of the heart as are set forth in the catechism to which reference is made: "Ye are

to take care that this child be brought to the bishop to be confirmed by him *so soon* as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the ten Commandments, and is *sufficiently instructed* in the other parts of the Church Catechism set forth for that purpose." Of course no one is compelled to her communion. But the consideration of years is set aside by naming the *earliest* period of suitable qualifications. Surely she suffers the little children to come unto CHRIST, and forbids them not; but willingly recognises them to be of the kingdom of heaven.

1. To *parents* this is a subject for very serious and solemn consideration. Have you regarded it in this light? Have you been sensible that your little children, so soon as they became subjects of intellectual culture, were *then* at an age to become truly and fully religious? Have you considered their childhood as the age by far the *best adapted* to the effectual reception of CHRIST and his salvation; by far the *best time* for them to become decided and confirmed Christians? You, who have had the training of children, have had, to an astonishing degree, their religious character and eternal welfare in *your* power. Had you done your duty, it might have failed; but it could hardly have failed but that your children, before leaving the precincts of childhood, had given substantial evidence of established Christian character. If it be otherwise with your children, will your conscience be pacified by the unavailing wish that they may take up religion of their own accord hereafter? or by the absurd pretence of leaving them at liberty to choose for *themselves?* You cannot leave them free. To attempt to do so is not the way to discharge yourselves of your responsibility. Your very pretence of doing so has an amazing influence on their minds; almost compels them to continue irreligious through the most important and *critical* period of their lives; and, in connexion with the dreadful habit of procrastination, almost binds them over to perdition. The influence of the parent over the child is of divine institution and appointment. GOD hath invested you with this talent, which he expects you to improve in the service of a cause, for the benefit of which the parental relation was established.

2. This subject leads us to regard the *Sunday School* as an institution of *vast* importance. In the rise, progress, and wonderful extent of this mode of religious instruction, we may plainly see a divine Providence asserting the religious interests and claims of children, and moving the Church to feed her lambs. The hand of GOD is put forth to turn the tide of a pernicious and almost universal error. Why, since the world discovered so long ago the utility and importance of schools in every other department of instruction, why was it not seen at once, that correspondent facilities of religious edification might be derived from schools adapted to religious exercise, instruction and impression? And why were not the advantages of schools applied to religious education? It was the same error which, on other occasions, has called forth the strong and unambiguous expression of divine regard for children.

O that the Church might see the guiding hand of GOD's providence, that feeling a sense of the responsible duty of feeding the lambs of CHRIST's flock, she might see and feel the importance of the *Sunday School* as it is; and might enter this field of duty and usefulness, with the zeal and determination which it so *richly* merits!

Let parents send their children to the Sunday School, with the desire and the expectation that they may become religious immediately. And let such a hope be distinctly understood, frequently manifested, and strongly urged by parental influence at home.

Let pastors labor assiduously in the Sunday School. Let them stand and feel not satisfied with the mere wish that this interesting portion of their charge will become religious when they grow up, but with the *earnest* hope and expectation of gathering immediate fruit unto eternal life; that both he that soweth, and he that reapeth, may rejoice together. If the doctrine be indeed true, that children are more likely to become pious than adults, let us labor among them with the greater hope, as we may indeed with the greater success. If children and youth comprise the larger portion of the pastor's charge, should they have the lesser portion of his care? If

there be love for the Church, must there not be special care of her *youthful* members? If we love CHRIST, must we not *feed* his *lambs?*

And let teachers come to the help of the LORD with hearts warmed by that love, and encouraged by the hope which our subject inspires. Let them willingly offer themselves to this sublime work of Christian benevolence, not exclusively, nor chiefly with a view to a distant result. Let them direct their attention, and adapt their exertions to *immediate success.*

And let all, whether by money, or by labor, as the case may be, and especially by prayers and influence, promote an institution, so *well* adapted, and which seems in the providence of GOD designed to correct that awfully prevalent and deplorable error, under the dominion of which the iniquity of the fathers has been visited upon the children generation after generation; and thousands, who in childhood might have been easily gathered into the fold of CHRIST, and kept by the power of GOD, through faith unto salvation, have been *educated* for the service of sin, and *plunged* down to the gates of perdition.

YOUTH ENCOURAGED TO SEEK CHRIST.

YE hearts with youthful vigor warm,
In smiling crowds draw near;
And turn from every mortal charm,
A Saviour's voice to hear.

He, LORD of all the worlds on high,
Stoops to converse with you;
And lays his radiant glories by,
Your friendship to pursue.

"The soul that longs to see my face,
Is sure my love to gain;
And those that early seek my grace,
Shall never seek in vain."

DISCRIMINATING PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL.

"THE discerning of spirits,"* in its ordinary measure, is a spiritual gift yet continued to the Church. And there is no gift more important for the wise and edifying discharge of the Christian ministry. A knowledge of character—an accurate insight into the motives of Christian profession, is a most desirable attainment, and one to which is annexed a special ministerial promise.† Whatever natural acuteness may belong to this faculty, yet as a *spiritual qualification*, it is a part of that heavenly wisdom, of which the Christian minister needs a double portion, and which is "given liberally unto him"‡ that asketh.

The losing sight of the wide distinction between a credible profession and a spiritual conversion of heart, has occasioned the general and most dangerous mode of addressing all persons under the Christian character, upon the ground of their acknowledgment of a national creed, or external regulations. It is therefore most important to *draw the line broadly between the Church and the world.* It cannot be too strongly laid down in our ministry, that the word of GOD recognises but two classes among men—those that "are of GOD, and the whole world that lieth in wickedness."§ They are described by *their state before* GOD, as converted or unconverted—by *their knowledge or ignorance of the Gospel*, as spiritual or natural men—by *their special regard to* CHRIST, as believers or unbelievers—by *their interest in the Spirit of* GOD, "having not the Spirit of CHRIST," or "being in the Spirit"—by *their habits of life*, "walking after, and minding, the things of the flesh or the things of the Spirit"—by their respective *rules of conduct*, the course of this world or the word of GOD—by *the masters whom they respectively obey*, the servants of GOD and the servants of Satan—by *the road in which they travel*, the broad road or the narrow way—by *the ends to which their roads are carrying them*

* 1 Cor. xii. 10. † See Jer. xv. 19. ‡ James i. 5. § 1 John v. 19.

—death and life—hell and heaven. The line of demarcation, therefore, between these two classes, with the numerous modifications belonging to each, is like that "great gulf"* which separates the two divisions of the eternal state. There can be no amalgamation between these principles, containing as they do within themselves the elements of contrariety in every particular. And therefore to classify these two denominations in general terms, and under one name, is to confound light with darkness, and CHRIST with Belial. Nothing can have a more direct and fatal tendency to quiet the consciences of the unconverted, and to perplex the conscience of the sincere Christian, than this loose and indiscriminate application of the Gospel to both descriptions in one general mass. It is therefore most important to a minister, to lay down with all possible plainness and accuracy the distinguishing marks of the converted and the unconverted, that each of our people may be able to form a competent judgment of his own case. Any misconception or failure in distinctness gives advantage to the self-delusion of the heart on the one side, and to the scrupulosity of unbelief on the other — errors, both of which seriously affect the spiritual condition of our people, and from which the clear light of Scripture is alone sufficient to guard them.

Nor is it less important to *separate between the professing and the true Church.* No part of the Christian character is without its counterfeit. The genuineness of the work of GOD is estimated, not by the extent, but by the influence of Christian knowledge—not by a fluency of gifts, but by their exercise in simplicity, humility, and self-denial—not by any excitement of feeling, but by its connexion with holiness and love. Brainerd (and no man had a clearer insight into counterfeit religion) excellently remarked, 'That much more of true religion consists in deep humility, brokenness of heart, and an abasing sense of want of grace and holiness, than most, who are called Christians, imagine.' He would often speak with the strongest abhorrence of that high profession which had nothing of the nature of

* Luke xvi. 26.

sanctification in it, that did not tend to strictness, tenderness, and diligence in religion, to meekness and benevolence toward mankind—and that was not manifested by modesty of conduct and conversation. He emphatically enforces the importance of this discrimination upon a probationer for the ministry. 'Labor,' said he, '*to distinguish clearly* upon experiences and affections in religion, that you may make a difference between the gold and the shining dross. I say, labor here, if ever *you would be a useful minister of* CHRIST.' This peculiar difficulty reminds us of the importance of studying the frame and moving principles of the human mind. Some knowledge of this interesting subject (without entering into metaphysical depths) will shed light on many perplexing cases, enabling us to mark the influence of bodily passions, constitutional temperament, or disordered imagination, in casting a cloud upon genuine piety, or framing a false resemblance of it.

"*Preach* CHRIST JESUS *the* LORD." "Determine to know nothing among your people but CHRIST crucified." Let his name and grace, his Spirit and love, triumph in the midst of all your sermons. Let your great end be to glorify him in the heart, to render him amiable and precious in the eyes of his people, to lead them to him; as a sanctuary to protect them, a propitiation to reconcile them, a treasure to enrich them, a physician to heal them, an advocate to present them and their services to GOD, as wisdom to counsel them, as righteousness to justify, as sanctification to renew, as redemption to save. Let CHRIST *be the diamond to shine in the bosom of all your sermons.*